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FM AMEMBASSY ASMARA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0429
INFO IGAD COLLECTIVE
USMISSION GENEVA
CIA WASHDC
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SECDEF WASHDC
CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
COMUSNAVCENT

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 000269

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E AND AF/EX

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/09/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: ICRC IN ERITREA BEING UNMEE'ED

REF: A. ASMARA 138
[1](#)B. ASMARA 225

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d)

[1](#)1. (C) AN ASMARA VERB: The Isaias regime is attempting to UNMEE the ICRC in Eritrea, fears ICRC Head of Delegation Gherardo Pontrandolfi (please protect). Among Eritrea's dwindling expat community, the verb "to UNMEE" is used to connote the regime's purposeful tightening of restrictions on an unwanted international entity to persuade it to leave the country without explicitly ordering it to go. The regime's fuel blockade of the UN Mission to Eritrea and Ethiopia (UNMEE) succeeded in forcing UNMEE to leave Eritrea last year. The most recent example of another regime "success" was the UNMEEing of Medecins du Monde, one of the last operating NGOs in Eritrea, which threw in the towel in July after the regime issued stifling new NGO "guidelines." Only four NGOs remain, down from 38 just after independence.

[1](#)2. (C) RESTRICTED ICRC TO SCALE DOWN: Pontrandolfi recounted that the regime has not allowed ICRC to buy diesel fuel in over a year, has impounded ICRC vehicles, has halted key ICRC programs, and has not allowed Asmara-based ICRC staff to venture outside the capital since March (reftels). He is determined to keep an ICRC presence in Eritrea, despite these restrictions. He expects to have to scale back on international and local staff in coming months, and envisages staffing cuts of up to fifty percent by January.

[1](#)3. (C) A WAR-TIME ANACHRONISM: Yemane Ghebremeskel, Director of the Office of the President (and one of the hardest-line regime insiders) sees the ICRC presence in Eritrea as an anachronism lingering from the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia. He reportedly told ICRC that as the EEBC boundary decision had settled the border issue (in Eritrea's favor), there was no need for a big ICRC presence, just as there was no longer a need for UNMEE. UN agencies, also heavily restricted, are not yet in the same dire straits as ICRC and the four remaining NGOs (Oxfam International, Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran World Federation, and Norwegian Church Aid).

MCMULLEN